ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

The Perils of Morning Coffee

An Isabel Dalhousie eBook Original Story

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Alexander McCall Smith

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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

The Perils of Morning Coffee

Other Books by This Author
Excerpt from The Forgotten Affairs of Youth

ISABEL DALHOUSIE SAW BROTHER FOX that morning at eleven minutes past four. She was not one to take much notice of such details—she felt it was usually a matter of little importance to know exactly what time it was, unless, of course, one was a railway company, or an airline, for whom concern about punctuality was entirely understandable and, on the whole, to be encouraged. She wore a watch—a small gold one that bore the reassuring message *Entirely made in Switzerland*, and had belonged to her mother—her *sainted American mother*, as she thought of her—but she only glanced at it a few times a day: when Charlie had to go to playgroup, for example, or when he had to be picked up again in the early afternoon. For the most part, she was content to have only a very rough idea of the time, and had considerable admiration for those who measured their lives against the seasons, as farmers do, or the tides, as fishermen must. Time, she felt, made quite enough claims on us, without our conniving in its relentless tyranny.

She knew that it was eleven minutes past four because that was what showed on the clock built into the cooker in her kitchen. This clock, which had a glowing display, was unfailingly precise, declaring the hour, the minute and the second in pulsing electric numerals. Like those disquieting clocks that remind us of the burgeoning of the national debt—thousands upon thousands being added with each passing second—this display could provoke uncomfortable thoughts. The number of seconds each of us has in this life is, after all, finite, and every one that ticks past brings us closer to the point where we shall have only a few moments left. Some dwell on such thoughts with the equanimity that comes from acceptance—from dust we come and to dust we return; others would prefer not to be reminded of mortality. There is no point, they feel, in thinking about the inevitable—precisely because it is inevitable. On the other hand, Isabel thought that *carpe diem*—seize the day—was probably one of the more helpful mottoes by which to lead one's life, and if a glance at the time served to remind us of it, then that was no bad thing.

Isabel and Jamie rarely paid any attention to this cooker clock, and would not have been aware of its accuracy had Isabel's housekeeper, Grace, not remarked that she had checked it against the time signal on BBC Radio and had discovered that it was absolutely accurate, down to the second.

"Then I certainly won't argue with the cooker," said Isabel. "Or indeed with any domestic appliances."

Grace had glanced at her. Her employer's remarks were often somewhat difficult to fathom, and this one, she thought, was typical. Why should anybody want to argue with a domestic appliance—with

a vacuum cleaner, for instance? Grace would never argue with things like that; if they misbehaved, she kicked them.

Isabel had once observed this and had commented on it to Jamie. “I saw her kick the vacuum cleaner this morning. It was stuttering a bit—I think it was blocked—and she kicked it quite hard.”

“And?” asked Jamie.

“It started going again.”

“Well, there you are,” said Jamie.

“But one should be very careful about kicking things,” said Isabel. “One can’t go through life lashing out at things that don’t work.”

“Possibly not,” said Jamie, thinking of one of his pupils, who had hit his bassoon in frustration and broken one of the keys.

Eleven minutes past four: she noticed the red flashing display and immediately glanced out of the window. It was light outside—the summer solstice was only a matter of days away—and the sun was already on the tree-tops. She liked the light of morning, with its crispness and, well, its innocence. The light of afternoon and evening was a *used* light, a light that had no intentions of encouraging or revealing anything new; a light under which all sorts of minor sins could be practised without detection.

At first Brother Fox was not there, and then he was. He appeared at the top of the stone garden wall that ran along the edge of the garden, a highway for the cats of the neighbourhood and for Brother Fox himself. He took a few steps forward and stopped, sniffed at the air, and then continued his journey. Isabel, now standing at the kitchen window, was motionless. Brother Fox, she had decided, did not see her if she remained still, and there was glass between the two of them. Perhaps he saw his own reflection, or the sky mirrored in the window; perhaps he saw shapes and shadows that meant nothing to him. Certainly now he was looking at her directly, it seemed, and was unperturbed. Then, as if remembering some commitment, he continued along the top of the wall before leaping down into the next-door garden.

The encounter with Brother Fox was brief, but it meant that Isabel would now be unable to go directly back to bed. Sleep might return after a brief period of wakefulness but tended to be elusive after a few minutes, and particularly so after a few minutes in which something had happened. Her mind was now active, engaged with thoughts of what Brother Fox might be up to. He led a life to which she was only fleetingly admitted—those times when she saw him emerging cautiously from beneath the rhododendron bushes, sniffing at the air for signs of danger, trotting across an expanse of lawn, disappearing as quickly and mysteriously as he had appeared. He had his plans, of course, but what they were was his business and remained quite

opaque to Isabel. He was concerned with survival, she thought, as were we all, but somehow she felt that to reduce his life to that and that alone was to demean it, to undervalue it. If he felt fear, as he clearly did, then might he not feel other emotions too? Did he experience love and tenderness when he slept at night with his mate and their brood of cubs?

She had woken up feeling hungry—a light dinner the previous evening was responsible for that—and now, with a glass of milk in her hand, she made her way into her study. She knew that if she started to work she would not get back to sleep at all and would feel the consequences for the rest of the day. There was plenty for her to do: a pile of manuscripts sat on one corner of her desk, while on another corner there perched a tower of books sent in for review. She decided that she would attend to neither of these. She switched on her computer and watched the screen resolve; there were several new emails—patient electronic sorting rooms somewhere dispatched these while their senders and recipients slumbered. Two were routine, but a third announced: *You have been invited* … She was about to dismiss this as an unsolicited advertisement of some sort, but something made her pause and open it.

"You have been invited to coffee," the message said. Where? At the Elephant House. When? A time and date were given: it was to be at eleven the following morning. And then there was the name of the person who had issued the invitation, Dr. George MacLeod. And he would be accompanied, the message went on, by Dr. Mark Robertson. Nothing else was said.

Isabel frowned. The name George MacLeod meant nothing to her. There had been a famous Scottish theologian of that name, a radical figure who had been a thorn in the side of the establishment, but he was long dead, and his son, whom Isabel knew vaguely, did not bear the name George. It was a common enough name anyway, and there would be scores of George MacLeods in Edinburgh and that part of Scotland. Was he somebody whom she had encountered professionally? Perhaps he had sent in a manuscript for the *Review;* she could not remember everybody who wrote to her in her capacity as editor.

She decided to do a quick Internet search, typing in the name George MacLeod followed by "philosophy." Her intuition was correct. Dr. George MacLeod taught philosophy at the university, and a further search revealed that Dr. Mark Robertson was a colleague of his. That settled it. She must have met them at some meeting and perhaps suggested that they should meet again. People made such suggestions freely—the words "We must meet for lunch or coffee one day" were an expression of interest in pursuing an acquaintanceship even if they

were not to be taken literally.

She looked at her diary; there was nothing to stop her accepting the invitation. She wrote a quick reply. She would be happy to meet them and looked forward to it.

She left her desk and walked across the room to the window. The glass of milk had dealt with her hunger and was beginning to make her feel sleepy. She would slip back into bed, trying not to wake Jamie as she did so. He was usually a sound sleeper but registered her comings and goings. She did not want him to be tired later that day as he had a recording session with a conductor with whom he had not worked before and who had a reputation for irritability. "He can be as rude as a television chef," Jamie had said. Isabel had wondered why chefs should get away with rudeness. "Because they control our food," he replied. "It's something very basic. And they're celebrities. People forgive stars like that."

It was not much of an explanation, she felt, but she had said nothing. They had different tolerance levels for rudeness. She was appalled by it, while Jamie seemed to accept it as something that happened and was inevitable. "There are people like that," he said. "There just are."

This was a difference between them—an important one—but she did not want to explore it, or at least not at that moment.

"Complete strangers!" Jamie exclaimed over breakfast. "Should you go off and meet people who are … utterly unknown?"

Isabel defended her decision to accept the invitation. "But they're hardly utterly unknown, as you put it," she said. "They're both members of the philosophy department at the university. I looked them up."

"I meant unknown to you," said Jamie.

"That doesn't matter. Besides, I must have met them in passing, somewhere or other," she said.

"You get all sorts of rubbish on the Internet," Jamie mumbled. "And you shouldn't go off and meet people you don't know …" He did not finish the sentence, but looked at Isabel with concern.

She reassured him that the meeting was to take place in broad daylight in a crowded café. "Even if they weren't two philosophers," she said. "Even if they were …" She searched for the right word. People talked about predators, and perhaps that was the right term, though it was less colourful than *desperadoes*, for instance, or even *dacoits*, as they were called in India—not that real dacoits operated in the ether; they holed up in the mountains and remote valleys and carried out their depredations from there. "Even if they were undesirables." It was a weak compromise, and she sounded, she

feared, like someone of her mother's generation. They had talked about undesirables, who were never specifically defined but were referred to as people one should avoid, especially if one were a teenage girl. And such warnings, of course, made undesirables sound all the more exciting; in fact, it made them sound like just the sort of people one might hope to meet at the Dominion Cinema when one went there at the age of twelve for the matinee performance.

Jamie did not pursue the issue of undesirables, and the matter was left there. But when Isabel returned to her study after taking Charlie to playgroup, she saw that a further email had arrived with the simple title: *Coffee invitation cancelled*.

The message this time was more personal. "Dear Isabel Dalhousie," it began. "I'm so sorry. We have not met before, but my computer has taken it upon itself to invite you to coffee. There is some sort of glitch in a program I have called Invite Me. It suddenly took upon itself to invite people who appear in email copy lists I have received; your name must have been on the circulation list of a message I received and it picked you up there. Please disregard the invitation. I apologise for any inconvenience this has caused. Yours sincerely, George MacLeod."

Isabel read it with a smile. If technology separated people—as it clearly did, isolating them behind their computer screens, destroying real contact—then it could clearly repent and bring them together, as it had done here. So the invitation to coffee had been a mistake, though not a mistake of much consequence. Presumably computers made much greater errors, and told people that they had been fired, or transferred to some distant posting, or awarded a medal; inviting them to coffee was nothing really.

She sat down at her keyboard and prepared her response. The erroneous invitation had been no inconvenience at all, and she would still be very happy to meet in the Elephant House if Dr. MacLeod was free. "You may be interested in hearing about plans for the *Review of Applied Ethics*," she wrote. And thought of adding: "Or, of course, you may not be interested in that at all," but did not.

She sent the message. A few minutes later, the reply came. "I would be delighted to stick to our arrangement, although I'm afraid that I will be by myself—Mark cannot make it." There then came an observation on the serendipity of mistakes. "Things done in error are often best left not undone—if you see what I mean!" She did: double negatives had their place, as in being not unhappy, or not unclear. Triple and other multiple negatives were more difficult; there was no case, she felt, for saying that the day was turning out to be not unlike that which she had not expected.

When she entered the Elephant House the following morning, it was as bustling as ever. Having ordered a cup of coffee at the counter, she made her way through to the back, where the café opened out into a large, airy room filled with old pine tables. She was ten minutes early, and she doubted whether George MacLeod would be there yet, but she nonetheless scanned the faces of the people at the tables to see if there was anyone who fitted her image of George MacLeod. Everybody, it seemed, was either too young or too old. George MacLeod, she had ascertained from his profile on the departmental page, was forty-two, and there was nobody who looked that age in the room. Except me, she said to herself, in a moment of self-appraisal. I am about that …

She seated herself at the only free table, under one of the large windows, and looked out. The view was of Candlemaker Row, a narrow street that descended sharply towards the Grassmarket. There were angled slate roofs, chimney pots, stone gables and, towering above them, like the set of some improbable opera, the Castle. For a few moments she stared at the scene. The fragility of the city touched her, as it always did; made her catch her breath. And she *lived* in this: that was what never failed to astonish her. *I live in the midst of this beauty*.

"Isabel Dalhousie?"

She turned round to see a man in a light brown linen suit smiling at her. He had extended his hand, and she shook it.

"I was looking out of the window," she said, gesturing behind her. "I love that view of the rooftops."

He looked out over her shoulder. "Of course. The other day, you know, I was in a flat in Ramsey Garden, up near the Castle. The people who lived in it had the most breathtaking view out over the Firth of Forth, over to Fife. It was like being in an airship—or what I imagine it must be like to be in an airship."

He sat down, placing his cup of coffee carefully before him. "I'm glad that you agreed to meet," he said. "Sometimes when I go to meetings abroad and they hear I'm from Edinburgh, they say, 'Oh you must know Isabel Dalhousie, who edits that journal.' And I have to say, 'Actually, I don't.' And that makes them think that I can't be very important."

Isabel laughed. "People imagine that everybody in Scotland knows everybody else in Scotland.

George MacLeod smiled. "Don't they?"

"Not quite."

The conversation moved on to philosophy and to philosophers whom they both knew. Professor Lettuce's name cropped up, but only briefly. "I've heard that his Hume book is going to be really rather good," George said. "Worth waiting for."

Isabel wondered whether there was sarcasm in the reference to waiting for the book, but decided that there was not. There was something appealingly open, even benevolent, about George MacLeod, something that was apparent even on this brief acquaintance, and it did not seem likely to her that he would make a snide remark. A nice man, she thought.

"I'm sure that his views will be …" She floundered. She disliked Lettuce so much that it was difficult for her to find the words to compliment him. "Insightful," she said at last, conscious of the hollowness of her words.

George MacLeod was smiling. "Indeed," he said. "Insightful. Perhaps rather …"

He did not finish his sentence. It was a cue, thought Isabel. "Perhaps not to everybody's taste," she said quietly. "Like poor Professor Lettuce himself."

"Exactly," said George MacLeod in low tones. "I'm sure that Lettuce has his many good points, but …"

It was turning into a conversation studded with ellipses, Isabel observed, but it confirmed her feeling that George MacLeod was a kindred spirit. If two people disliked Lettuce, then it was probable that they saw the world in much the same way.

"There are certainly good points in Lettuce's character," Isabel said firmly. "It's just that I haven't seen them personally." She looked away as she spoke. *If I have not charity*, a voice within her said, *then I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal* … She now added quickly, "I am at fault, I'm sure, for not noticing them, of course."

For a moment George MacLeod said nothing. Then he asked, as if innocently, "And Christopher Dove. What about Christopher Dove? Do you see much of him?"

"Not very much," said Isabel. "But that little, I'm afraid, is enough."

George MacLeod raised an eyebrow, and Isabel immediately felt guilty. "I shouldn't have said that. It sounds awful," she said.

"It sounds honest," he countered. "I can't stand him either."

They moved from personalities to more substantial matters. At the end of their discussion, which ranged widely, Isabel had resolved to use George MacLeod as a reviewer, if he proved to be interested in the task. He was.

"It's the easiest way of building up one's library," he said.

In her mind's eye she saw the pile of books sitting on the edge of her desk; far from being built up, her library needed weeding.

"But I shouldn't review Lettuce on Hume," he said quickly. "I don't think that I could be objective."

She appreciated that. It would be tempting to give Lettuce's book to one of the Machiavellian professor's sworn enemies, and she

wondered how firm MacLeod would be if she pressed it into his hands. But no, she could not do that; being editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics* involved certain obligations, and to act ethically was one of them.

They talked for half an hour or so. Then, glancing at his watch, George explained that he had an appointment to keep. "An appointment with the dentist," he said, pointing to the time. "I'm so sorry. I've enjoyed our talk so much."

She nodded, as if to say, yes, one should not keep one's dentist waiting. Then she thought: One should keep nobody waiting, really. Yet there were reasons, of course, why it might be particularly unwise to irritate a dentist. "Yes," she said. "One must always be in time for one's dentist."

He smiled. "Just a check-up."

He rose to his feet, and they said goodbye. Isabel lingered for a few minutes, watching the other people in the café. Coffee could easily become lunch if one was not careful, and lunch could so comfortably slip into afternoon tea. But not today.

That evening, while Jamie gave Charlie his bath—an occasion of energetic splashing and shrieks of delight—Isabel gave a brief account of her meeting with George MacLeod. Jamie listened in a rather bemused fashion before saying that in the future he thought she should not make a habit of meeting strangers.

"I won't," she said. "Don't worry."

They did not talk about it again and she did not think about George MacLeod until the following day when, remembering her decision to offer him books for review, she made a list of the review copies on her desk and sent it to him. "A few of these may be to your taste," she wrote. "And if they are, perhaps I could persuade you to review them." She mentioned that the *Review of Applied Ethics* could not pay its reviewers—or any of its contributors, for that matter—but said that she hoped he would understand. "In an ideal world …" She left the sentence unfinished, and thought, somewhat mischievously, *In an ideal world the contributors would pay us*. And that, alas, was true, she decided, although it would be ideal only for the publishers of the academic journals.

The tackling of the stack of review copies amounted to progress, as did the inroads that she made over the following two days on the pile of manuscripts awaiting her attention. Soon that was reduced to a small number of what she called "heart-sink cases"—articles which she feared were barely publishable but had been written by people who had some claim upon her: former colleagues at university or people she had known when they were fellow graduate students at

Georgetown. It would have been simpler to reject these rather than to seek to rescue them by suggesting changes and improvements, but with her highly attuned sense of moral obligation, Isabel could not give the brush-off to those with whom she had a connection, no matter how tenuous or ancient it might be.

It was while she was contemplating one of these—an article on the moral significance of self-reproach—that the telephone rang. Her mind was still elsewhere as she picked it up: was a capacity for self-reproach a character trait that had to be respected? And if so, should we be hesitant to undermine it by suggesting that blaming oneself in a particular situation was unnecessary? If somebody should say to herself …

"Is that Isabel Dalhousie?"

The voice at the end of the line—a woman's voice—was abrupt.

"Yes. It is."

The woman came back quickly. "You don't know me."

Isabel wondered how one replied to that. One could say that no, one did not, or, more politely, that one hoped that this would soon be rectified.

"My name is Roz MacLeod." This was followed by a slight pause, and then, "You know my husband, of course."

For a moment or two Isabel was at a loss, and then she remembered her meeting with George MacLeod. She hardly knew him; it would have been more appropriate to say, "You've *met* my husband."

"George MacLeod? Yes, I've met him."

The woman laughed. "That's one way of putting it."

The voice now revealed itself as unfriendly, even sneering, and Isabel realised that this was a hostile call. She said nothing, but the discovery of unexpected hostility was a shock.

The woman took a noisy breath. "Listen," she said. "And listen carefully. You stay away from him. I know that he's having an affair. I've known for some time. You stay away … We've been married for eleven years, you know, eleven years. You keep out of our marriage …" The accusing words tumbled out. There was a rawness, and the woman's voice began to be choked.

The shock hit Isabel with physical intensity. "An affair?"

"Don't deny it. I saw you. I saw you both. Coming out of that place on George IV Bridge. You didn't think you might be seen, did you? George and I … Don't think that just because a man says he's available, he really is. Don't you think that …"

Isabel interrupted. "This is complete nonsense. I've met your husband precisely once. Once. Do you hear me? Once."

"Don't try to deny it." Roz MacLeod's voice rose now, became shrill.

"But of course I deny it," said Isabel hotly. "I deny it absolutely. I

met your husband for …" She paused.

"Yes? Go on."

She wondered how she could explain: the real explanation sounded completely implausible. Who would believe a story about an accidental invitation issued by an over-enthusiastic computer program? Of course, genuine explanations or excuses often had a ring of oddness to them, while false ones sounded only too likely. Dogs sometimes did eat the homework; ice did on occasion fall from the wings of aircraft flying overhead and break windows; diary entries did get made on the wrong page, or erased by mistake. All of these happened, but who would think such excuses anything but made up?

"I met your husband to discuss philosophy," said Isabel, struggling to keep her voice even. But she sounded stressed; she could tell as much herself.

Roz MacLeod snorted. "Oh yes! To discuss philosophy." There was a brief pause to let the challenge sink in. Then, unceremonious and curt, the word was spat out: "Liar."

Isabel gasped.

"Keep away," the other woman continued. "Keep away." And with that she slammed down the phone.

Jamie was sympathetic, and if he was tempted to say that he had warned Isabel of the consequences of assignations with strangers, he remained tactful.

"She must be paranoid," he said. "It's obvious. Ignore it. That's the best thing to do with paranoia."

Isabel looked indignant. "I can't," she protested. "She's accused me of having an affair with her husband. How can I ignore that?"

He made a gesture of resignation. "If you engage with people like that, you simply fuel their paranoia. Don't you see? It makes it worse."

"And if she goes around telling people about it? What if a rumour gets going? You know how people talk in Edinburgh."

Jamie shook his head. "She's highly unlikely to do that. She won't want people talking about her marriage, will she? I don't think so."

Isabel felt uncomfortable about it, but, after a brief further discussion, accepted his advice—for the moment. She tried to put the telephone call out of her mind—denial, she found, sometimes worked—but later that day her feeling of outrage returned, as insults will often seem the more painful some hours after they are delivered. She recalled reading somewhere, during an earlier period of enthusiasm for popular psychology magazines, about the physiology of provocation. The period immediately after an insult, the psychologists said, was not necessarily the time of greatest resentment; the real smarting came later, when adrenalin levels went up. Anger, it seemed,

took time to brew; an insult, then, might sting most painfully three or four hours after its delivery. And of course that seemed true, particularly if one reflected after the event on what one might have said in response, and had not: the right words, the pithy, scathing response, is rarely there when we need it.

She understood Jamie's point about the pointlessness of arguing with paranoia, but she felt nevertheless that she could not ignore what had happened. She was unsettled, and quite deeply so. There were several questions that she believed required an answer. The first of these was particularly puzzling: Exactly how had Roz McLeod identified her? Isabel was reasonably well-known in Edinburgh but by no means a public figure. Her photograph never appeared in the newspapers, and so she could not understand how anybody who had never met her would know who she was. Could Roz have gone into the Elephant House and asked the staff? It was true that Isabel went there occasionally for coffee, but not frequently enough to be known to the staff. Did this mean that she had been followed? She had walked home from her meeting with George, and it would have been easy enough for Roz to trail behind her across the Meadows, through Bruntsfield, and then into her own street. She could have done that without being noticed—Isabel had not looked back at all, and why would one so much as glance over one's shoulder while walking through Edinburgh in broad daylight?

Of course, if she had been followed, it would have not been difficult to find her name. There used to be street directories that listed the occupants of each house; Isabel was not sure whether those still existed—they probably did not—but there was the electoral roll, and there might be other public sources of information. Or there was simple word of mouth; if one went to one of the other houses in the street with some specious reason for finding out who lived where, it would, she thought, be easy enough to get the answer one needed. People were trusting, and would not necessarily suspect an ulterior motive behind an apparently simple enquiry.

And then another, perhaps more plausible, explanation suggested itself. She had arranged the meeting with George by email. Roz and George might operate different email accounts—spouses often used the same computer, and even when they did not, the newspapers were full of stories of wives who switched on their husbands' computers to stumble upon incriminating material: notes to lovers, arrangements for assignations, clandestine chatting on chat lines. And vice versa. People behaved badly electronically, just as in the real world. Perhaps Roz had simply read the email in which they agreed to meet and, armed with the foreknowledge of where and when the meeting would take place, had stationed herself outside the Elephant House to get a

glimpse of her rival.

Isabel felt her resentment grow as she contemplated the sheer injustice of what had happened. She was innocent, and she simply would not tolerate a situation in which she was viewed as an adulteress. *I am not; I am not* … She stopped herself. She knew that she was innocent of the charge levelled against her—but was George MacLeod innocent too? What if Roz MacLeod was quite right, and her husband was having an affair, but with somebody else?

It was an arresting thought, and it suddenly changed her feelings towards the other woman. Yes, she could understand the desperation, the irresistible desire to find out who it was who was ruining her marriage. Yes, she understood the sense of outrage, the anger at being betrayed by an unfaithful spouse; and Roz MacLeod, poor woman, must be feeling just that. Of course she would hate me for it, Isabel reflected; of course she would want to phone and warn me off. She was fighting for her man, after all, and many women would go to any lengths in that particular battle, even to the extent of calling up a perfect stranger—and what that cost must have cost her in emotional energy—and telling her to desist. Roz was not being aggressive; she could, on the contrary, have been much less restrained.

Then the idea occurred to Isabel: if she found out more about George MacLeod, she might be able to work out whether he was indeed having an affair with somebody else. And if that were so, the fact would vindicate his wife. And if she could find out the identity of his lover, could she turn Roz in the right direction and deflect the wrath that was so unjustly focused on her?

She hesitated. That was surely going too far. Was it any of her business? At first she thought that it was not, and then, rather quickly, she thought the opposite. There was a real sense in which it was very much her business. At present she was suspected by another woman of being her husband's lover. That woman had already taken the step of approaching Isabel to warn her off. It was possible that she could go further and confront her again, perhaps even engage in some act of revenge. Was it fanciful? She would have liked to think that it was, but she feared that it was not: the fact that somebody hated you was not something you could ignore. Almost every act of violence had hate at its core, had behind it a heart filled with resentment; so many victims of such acts must have felt secure in the knowledge that it would never happen to him, or to her. But it did. It happened.

"I hang on by my fingernails."

Isabel looked out of the window. Her friend Millie, who made this comment, had rigged a washing line between the metal window catch and a small stone thistle that decorated the ridge of the tenement roof.

There was a white blouse and what looked like a vest hanging on this line, the sleeves of the blouse filled by the breeze, flapping arms conducting some wind-inspired melody. But the vest: who still wore vests like that? And who had gone out onto the roof to secure the line? Millie, of course, who had always been a tomboy and loved taking risks.

Isabel's gaze returned to her friend. She was fond of Millie, but did not see her often enough—only once that year, when she had bumped into her in George Street and they had both been too busy to do anything more than exchange a few words.

"We all hang on by our fingernails," Isabel said. "In one way or another."

Millie frowned. "You don't. You've got a proper job. And you're your own boss."

Isabel looked embarrassed. "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. What I wanted to say was—"

Millie interrupted her. "No, I'm the one who should say sorry. Self-pity is very unattractive. You're right—we all do hang on by our fingernails. There's always something just round the corner ready to go wrong. Getting sick. Being evicted from your flat. Being run over by a bus."

Isabel smiled. "We're unduly hard on bus drivers, don't you think? People use that expression—getting run over by a bus—all the time. My mother used to say it. 'If I get run over by a bus, remember to give your grandmother's necklace—you know, the moonstone one—to Cousin Eve in Mobile.' That sort of thing. And yet, when you think of it, there are very few people who are actually run over by a bus. By other vehicles, yes, but bus drivers are really rather good at avoiding pedestrians."

Millie waved a hand airily. "A metaphor."

"And you know all about metaphors," Isabel said. Millie had written an article for the *Review of Applied Ethics* a couple of years previously on the metaphors by which we live. It had been well received, and was still cited from time to time in the literature.

"Not much," said Millie modestly. "Just a little."

"Your fingernails …"

Millie laughed. "It's by my fingernails that I hang on to my job—or my bit of a job."

Isabel was sympathetic. Millie belonged to that class of academics who had no full-time post, who laboured in the vineyards of their subject on post-doctoral fellowships or as badly paid teaching assistants. Such people were rarely fired from these posts, the view being that they would do them, largely without complaint, until they found a full-time job elsewhere, or drifted away in despair.

“You deserve something better,” Isabel said.

“Thank you. I have fantasies, you know, of somehow finding myself rich enough to be able to turn down the pittance they pay me and to say that I shall do the teaching for nothing. I’d become a volunteer, you see, and they couldn’t condescend to me.”

Isabel studied her friend. Millie was an inspired teacher of philosophy—she knew that from experience because she had taught a course with her years ago, when she had returned to Edinburgh. Students liked Millie and often migrated to her seminars from the less interesting offerings of her colleagues; not that this helped—on the contrary, it enraged some of the senior members of the department, who would have given anything for that degree of popularity.

Millie had made tea, and she now poured a cup for Isabel. “It’s good to see you,” she said. “Friends should see one another more often than we do.”

Isabel assured her that it was not intentional. “I’ve meant to get in touch,” she began.

“And so have I,” said Millie. “Life gets in the way, doesn’t it?”

Isabel took a sip of her tea; it was too cold. Millie had always been a hopeless cook, and this inability obviously extended to the making of tea. Her friend was not domestic in any way; a quick glance around the room was enough to confirm that. It was tidy enough, she supposed, but it had an air of not being lived in, of being ignored; it was the home of an ascetic. Poor Millie, she thought … and stopped herself. One should not think *poor* of anybody; it was condescending, and Millie’s life was, after all, what she had chosen for herself. She was happy enough with it, Isabel imagined, even if it did involve her clinging by her fingernails.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Isabel said.

Millie raised a polite eyebrow. “Please talk.”

“About one of your colleagues.”

Millie laughed. “Oh, that’s going to be fun. Where should we start?”

“It’s a serious question,” said Isabel.

Millie put on a look of mock apology. “Of course. They’re very serious people.”

“George MacLeod,” said Isabel.

The mention of the name had a marked effect on Millie—but only for a moment or two. It was as if a shadow passed over her face, a darkness; but it passed quickly and her expression became bright again. “George is a very competent philosopher,” she said. “Some would even go so far as to say that he’s a distinguished philosopher.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Isabel. “I happen to be familiar with some of his work.”

Millie seemed pleased to hear it. Isabel wondered why. Were they

allies? Academic departments tended to be riven with divisions; people belonged to factions, and had complicated loyalties. Did Millie need George's support if she were ever to get a permanent post? Did George need Millie's backing for some scheme or other?

"I met him for the first time the other day," said Isabel. "We had coffee together. We talked about all sorts of things."

Millie nodded. "I like the Elephant House," she said.

Isabel explained the strange circumstances of the meeting. "An over-enthusiastic computer program," she said. "But I'm glad that it invited me. I'm asking him to do some reviewing for me."

"He'll do that well," said Millie.

There was a short silence. Isabel took a sip of her tea. She decided she would tell Millie exactly what happened, and she did. When it came to the telephone call, she gave her reaction. "I felt outraged," she said. "I was accused of something of which I was entirely innocent."

Millie watched her. "Innocence implies guilt," she said quietly. "You don't need to assert innocence until there is reason for guilt." She spoke as if she were thinking aloud, engaging in some sort of soliloquy to order her thoughts.

"Well, I was innocent," said Isabel. "What a cheek! Phoning me up like that, out of the blue, and accusing me of carrying on with her husband."

Millie nodded. Isabel thought that she seemed preoccupied.

"I wondered," she continued, "I wondered whether you thought George capable of having an affair? Do you think he is? Do you think that she has good reason to be suspicious?"

Millie did not answer, but looked away, out of the window. Suddenly she rose to her feet and began to haul in the washing from the line outside. "It could rain," she said. "I must get this stuff in."

Isabel glanced at the sky, which was empty. "It won't rain," she said. "There isn't a cloud in the sky. Look."

"You never know," said Millie, taking the shapeless, rather grey vest off the line. She turned to Isabel. "She's the one who'll be having the affair," she said. "She's the one. Can't you see? The reason why she's accusing him is that she'll be having an affair with somebody. She's done it before, you know. Spectacularly. Several times."

"Spectacularly?"

Millie regained her seat. "Yes. The last time was with the window cleaner. I ask you, Isabel: the window cleaner! How tawdry can you get?"

"They clean windows," said Isabel. "It's a perfectly honest job."

"Of course it is. It's just so … so tawdry. You see the window cleaner on the other side of the window and think: That's somebody I

need to have an affair with. How tawdry."

Isabel thought about this for a moment. She was somewhat surprised to see Millie so exercised. "But we all meet the people we have affairs with somehow. What's the difference between meeting them at parties or … or at work?"

Millie glanced at her. "Around the photocopying machine?"

Isabel shrugged. "Or the coffee machine. Those are romantic spots."

Millie closed her eyes for a moment. Isabel watched her. We don't *look* at our friends, she thought. We don't stare at them as we stare at paintings in a gallery, taking in the details. But of course we can't do that because it would seem so … so odd, so disconcerting. I have never looked at you, Millie, she said to herself. I have never really looked at you, with your peculiar cardigan and your hair in a mess, like the nest of some badly organised bird, and your bare feet of which you have for some reason painted the nails of the big toes and left the others natural. Oh, Millie, how could you ever expect a man to take an interest? If that was what you wanted—but it was, because one evening you confessed it to me, and said that there was some Greek exchange student who had broken your heart and gone back to Greece. And you had cried because you imagined that he had returned to the glamorous Greek girl he had once mentioned, just casually, adding that her father owned a small island. And I thought: How can one compete with somebody whose father *owns* an island …?

"She's having an affair," Millie said. "Forget about him. It's much more likely that it's her."

Isabel did not reply for a few moments, and then she said, "Maybe."

Millie, though, was adamant. "Not maybe. Definitely."

"Could they both be having an affair? Isn't that possible?"

Millie was noncommittal. "I suppose we shouldn't underestimate the deviousness of our fellow human beings." She paused. "And that proposition certainly applies to colleagues. Isn't it interesting?"

Isabel suggested there was a simple explanation: We saw the faults in colleagues because our engagement with them was inherently competitive. Millie agreed. "I suppose I stand to benefit if one of my colleagues were to fall under a bus." She smiled at Isabel as she spoke. "Not that I'm accusing bus drivers of being particularly dangerous—I'm not—but in a purely metaphorical sense if one of our senior professors were to meet a premature end then the rest would be promoted and there would be a permanent place for me at the bottom of the ladder. Even the first rung would do. The first rung of any ladder is a lovely place to be, believe me. I dream of it, Isabel. But I mustn't think like that, must I?"

As Millie spoke, Isabel found herself imagining Professor Lettuce, the former chairman of her editorial board and an unscrupulous,

scheming man, falling under a lumbering double-decker bus, arms flailing as he disappeared under the wheels. The bus was red because Lettuce lived in London, somewhere near Richmond, or was it Wimbledon? And really he should live near Covent Garden, because that had been a vegetable market and vegetable markets were appropriate places for lettuces. She stopped herself. It was an uncharitable thought, and a childish one, a reversion to the infantile habit of picturing those one disliked with no clothes on, something one did at the age of eight, perhaps, and then grew out of; except one did not always grow out of the things one did as a child, not by any means. Isabel still looked under the bed from time to time, as she suspected we all did. And why not? There could well be occasions when people looked under the bed and saw something that they would not otherwise have seen—a burglar, perhaps, disturbed when the householder came home, and now hiding in the first place he could find. Cupboards were not a suitable place for burglars to hide as cupboards were already occupied by paramours—or they were in French farces—and if the cupboards were full of shivering, fearful lovers, cold because their clothes were in a pile behind the door, then there would be no room for burglars. Unless the burglars slipped into the cupboards and made a hushing gesture to the lovers hidden there, as if to say: *We're all in this together; you keep quiet about me and I'll keep quiet about you*.

While she was thinking of all this, Isabel's gaze had shifted from her friend and she was now staring out of the window. "It could rain," said Millie. "Those clouds over there are almost purple, aren't they?"

Isabel came to; she had not noticed the clouds. "Yes. It could rain." She turned her head and saw Millie looking at her in a bemused fashion.

"You're exactly like me, Isabel. You get lost in your thoughts. Don't deny it."

Isabel laughed. "I have no reason to deny anything. It's not an accusation. We are, after all, philosophers, you and I, and if we didn't get lost in our thoughts, then we wouldn't be doing our job."

Millie inclined her head gravely. "I suppose you're right. But I still feel slightly furtive about doing it. I don't know why, but I do."

"It's because there are plenty of things clearly intended to prevent people from serious thinking."

"Such as?"

"Advertising. Pressure to consume and to define oneself by consumption. Celebrity culture and all the shallowness that goes with it. Electronic noise of various descriptions. Piped music in shops and restaurants. I could go on."

Millie glanced up at the ceiling. "Yes," she said. "Of course." She

looked back at Isabel. “Oh well.”

“Yes,” said Isabel. “Oh well.”

Millie brightened. “And little Charlie? What’s he up to? Is he speaking?”

Isabel explained about Charlie’s latest pronouncement. Brother Fox, he had said, was good.

“Just that? Just good?”

“But it’s true,” said Isabel. “Brother Fox *is* good. He has no conception of evil or wrongdoing. And Charlie understood that, I think.”

Millie suddenly reached out to touch Isabel. They were sitting at opposite ends of Millie’s rather dilapidated sofa—Isabel was sure that she was directly above a broken spring—and Millie reached out and touched her lightly on the arm.

“You’re so lucky,” she said. “You have that little boy. And you have Jamie. And you have …” She tailed off.

Isabel’s heart went out to her friend. “But you have so much too,” she said gently. “You have an interesting job, even if it’s not as secure as you’d like it to be. And you have this place. That view out there. And your students love you, you know.”

Millie nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

“That means a lot,” said Isabel.

“Does it?” Millie mused. “Do you think that they’d miss me if … if I fell under a bus?”

They both laughed, and the tension that had suddenly developed disappeared.

“They would, absolutely.”

“But perhaps it depends on which bus I were to fall under,” said Millie. “Timing is all—isn’t that what they say? Isn’t that the conventional wisdom?”

A few minutes later, Isabel was making her way down the common stair of Millie’s tenement building. The stair was made of ancient stone that had been worn away by the footfall of several hundred years of inhabitants, generations who had occupied the building, trudging up and down these steps on their way in and out of a world that was so very different from today’s. The stone had that curious, almost indefinable smell to it, unlike anything other than the smell of a Scottish tenement stair: the scent of dust and damp combined; not an unpleasant smell, but a cold one, if smells can be cold or hot.

At the foot of the stair, she pushed open the heavy door on its protesting, now buckled hinges, and as she did so she remembered something that Millie had said. It was important, and for a moment she hesitated as she debated with herself whether to go back up and ask her about it. But she decided not to do so, and instead stepped out

onto the pavement, on which she saw that children had drawn in wavering lines their hopscotch squares. The coloured chalk was still visible, though the rain that had fallen the day before had blurred the lines, run blue into white and red into green. The drawings of children arrest us, she thought; as effortlessly as the greatest paintings—a Michelangelo in all its glory, a Vermeer in all its understated purity—they arrest us.

JAMIE WAS WITH CHARLIE IN THE GARDEN. Isabel joined them, bending down to pick up Charlie as he launched himself, unsteadily, at her legs. He hugged her legs possessively, like a terrier, and she sometimes had to prise the little boy's arms open to pick him up and return the hug.

"We found a couple of feathers from some bird," said Jamie. "Charlie wanted to put them back."

"On the bird?"

"Yes, on the bird."

She ran her fingers through Charlie's hair; he nestled his face against hers. He was so precious—so utterly precious—and he would have to learn soon enough about loss, about the fact that things could be destroyed, could be broken. That was a hard lesson, made all the more difficult by the realisation that some things could not be repaired, even by apparently omnipotent parents.

They walked back towards the house, with Isabel carrying Charlie. He was becoming tired—she could tell—and she imagined that he would not object to being put down for his afternoon sleep. He did not, and after she had put the small boy on his bed, accompanied by his favourite stuffed toy, increasingly threadbare from all the love given it, she joined Jamie in his music room. He was standing by the window looking at what seemed to her to be an impossibly complicated score.

"How can you play that?" she asked, peering over her shoulder. "It makes me feel dizzy just to look at it."

He shrugged. "It's not too bad. Mostly scales, up and down, if you look closely. See here? See this passage?" He pointed to a sharply ascending and descending line of demisemiquavers. She stared at his pointing finger, at his lightly tanned skin, so perfect. He paused, and then, looking up at her, enquired about Millie. "Usual mess?"

Isabel nodded. "I asked her about George MacLeod."

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"She said that his wife was more likely to be having an affair than George. She said that she's somewhat notorious for it. Apparently she had an affair with the window cleaner."

Jamie laughed. "What a cliché."

"Yes, but then many affairs are clichés, aren't they? The middle-aged man goes off with his younger secretary; the bored, neglected wife takes up with the tennis coach. Clichés are clichés precisely because they refer to what actually happens."

He replaced the score on the shelf. "All right, but even if she has had affairs in the past, that does not stop her being jealous of him. And the reason why she took up with other men might be because of

his unfaithfulness. So where does that leave things?"

He did not give Isabel time to answer. "It means that you should keep out of it. Leave it alone. Forget about it."

Isabel sighed. "I'd like to."

Jamie turned and put his arms round her. "Isabel, darling Isabel, there are some things best left well alone. I think this is one of them. These people are … well, it sounds as if they're trouble."

She nestled her head against his shoulder, as Charlie did to her. We can so easily revert to a childlike dependence, she thought. The temptation was always there to say: You tell me what to do; you tell me. It was like going to a lawyer, or an accountant, and saying: Please sort out the mess; and they did. Put the feathers back on the bird; make everything all right again.

Partly in response to Jamie's advice, and partly because she could not think of any other way of dealing with the situation, Isabel did nothing. Occasionally she reflected on the injustice of having unfounded allegations standing against her, but she tried not to brood, and largely succeeded. It was a busy time, with a new issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics* about to go to press, and her mind had plenty of other things to occupy it. But ten days or so later, when Isabel was in the supermarket in Morningside, a woman approached her and introduced herself as Roz MacLeod.

Isabel tried to smile. "Oh …"

"It's not every day," Roz said quietly, "that one gets to look one's enemy in the face."

Isabel felt her heart hammering within her. "Enemy? I'm sorry, but I don't know what you mean." She noticed that Roz was neither pushing a shopping trolley nor holding a basket. Had she followed her into the supermarket? Was this an entirely coincidental meeting?

"You know exactly what I mean," said Roz. "My husband."

Isabel struggled to master her fear. "Listen, Mrs. MacLeod, I assure you I have absolutely no contact with your husband. I've met him once. Once. That's all. And we talked about professional matters. That's the extent of our contact." As she spoke, she noticed that Roz had a slight facial tic—an eyelid that seemed to move on its own.

"And the letter?"

"What letter?" Even as she answered, Isabel remembered. "Oh, that? It was about a book review that he's doing for a journal I edit."

"But you said that you had no other contact, didn't you? That wasn't true, was it?"

She felt a mounting irritation. "I forgot about it. And it was professional. Why don't you read it? Or maybe you have."

The suggestion that Roz read her husband's mail had a marked

effect, and Isabel was encouraged. Roz seemed to shrink, to draw back; as any bully does, thought Isabel.

"I haven't …"

Isabel pressed home her advantage. "Then how did you know about it? And anyway, I don't have to answer to you, or anybody else, about my purely professional dealings. And you have no right to make totally unfounded—"

She did not finish. The other woman suddenly raised her hands to cover her face. She began to sob.

Isabel looked about her. Nearby, an elderly woman, reaching out for a can of beans from her shelf, caught her eye. It was a look of sympathy. Beyond the woman, standing in front of a trolley laden with cans, a teenage shelf-stacker glanced at Roz and then continued to shift the cans onto the shelves. Isabel thought: He finds it strange that we people—we adults—have scenes like this in supermarkets. What have *we* got to cry about?

Isabel moved forward to put an arm about Roz's shoulder. Her gesture was not repelled but welcomed, it seemed, as Roz reached for Isabel's blouse and held on to it. It was a curious, almost childlike gesture, but a reassuring one.

"I'm sorry," said Isabel. "I can understand how you must feel if you think your husband is having an affair. But it's not with me. It really isn't."

Roz muttered something between sobs, but Isabel did not catch it.

"I didn't quite …"

"I said: I can see now it's not you."

"Thank you. I'm glad." She paused. "Are you sure that he's seeing somebody?"

Roz nodded, and then wiped at her eyes with a small square of tissue. "Yes."

"Because sometimes people imagine things. They worry about things that really aren't happening."

Roz shook her head. "No. I know what's going on. And it's my fault."

"Why? Why's it your fault? Men get to a certain age and then they … well, they stray."

Roz looked at Isabel. The hostility having dissipated, Isabel noticed her eyes, an unusual flecked green. "It's because I asked for it. I was involved with somebody myself."

Any distrust that Isabel might have felt now disappeared. This woman was telling the truth, confirming what Millie had said.

"I had an affair," Roz went on. She hesitated for a moment. "I had more than one."

The window cleaner, thought Isabel. She said nothing.

“And then, when George started to see another woman, I found that I regretted, really regretted what I’d done. It was odd: it was as if I thought one rule applied to me and another to him.”

“People often think that,” said Isabel. And it was true. It was exactly what Kant had said we shouldn’t think: it was the categorical imperative. And here she was discussing it among the canned vegetables, the beans, the sweetcorn, the peas. Well, if philosophy had been obliged to descend into the marketplace, it was only a matter of time before it descended into the supermarket. Philosophy was not merely about abstract ideas of justice and duty, it was also about beans and sweetcorn and peas. And adultery.

“Did he know about your affairs?”

Roz did not answer for a moment. Guilt, thought Isabel; guilt and shame. But then: “Yes, I told him. I confessed it and I promised that I wouldn’t do it again.”

“And he forgave you?”

“I thought he did. But obviously he hasn’t.”

“*If* he’s seeing somebody,” said Isabel. “And you don’t *know* that, do you?”

It occurred to Isabel that Roz’s feelings of guilt were causing her to project behaviour onto her husband. If she felt bad about what she had done, then one way of assuaging her feelings of self-reproach would be to conclude that her husband was doing it too, that he was as much at fault as she was. This could easily have led her to imagine the possibility of George having an affair, and from there it would be a short step to believing that it was so. It required no great experience of human psychology’s surprising ways to believe that, thought Isabel.

“You don’t think he is?” asked Roz. There was a slightly pathetic tone to her voice, as if she needed Isabel to convince her of her husband’s faithfulness.

“I’m afraid I can’t say much more about that,” replied Isabel. “I know very little about your husband, other than that people seem to feel it unlikely that he’s having an affair. I can’t say much more than that. I really can’t.”

She felt a growing sense of the almost theatrical ridiculousness of this conversation. She could not leave this woman to her misery; that was not how she had ever responded to the distress of others. And yet the morally duteous approach left her vulnerable, as she was now, among the canned vegetables.

Roz looked at her with increased interest. “People? People are talking about it?”

Isabel sighed. “One person. I spoke to one other person.”

“Who was that?”

Isabel realised that she should be careful. She was beginning to

think that her earlier fears that Roz was paranoid might not be misplaced.

"It was a private conversation," she said. "I'm sorry, but all I can say is that this person—who works with your husband—told me that she did not consider it at all likely that he was having an affair." She paused. "Now, I think we should draw a line under all this. You and your husband need to talk more about this. You need to see …" She waved her hand airily, in the direction of the mayonnaise and stuffed olives, as it happened. "You need to see somebody. There are people who are there to help couples in your position. I gather they're very useful. Why not arrange something?"

Roz nodded. "Maybe," she muttered. And then added: "You're right."

Isabel felt a certain relief that the meeting was concluding on this note. "Good. Well, I'm sure we'll bump into one another again sometime." *I really don't want to*, she thought.

Roz looked at her earnestly. "I hope so."

Isabel was about to say that she hoped so too, but the words would not come. *I cannot tell a lie*. And then she wondered: How often is that statement made with regret?

As far as Isabel was concerned, her unexpected and uncomfortable meeting with Roz MacLeod in the unlikely surroundings of the supermarket—a meeting from which she retreated thinking, *Can that really have happened*?—had at least one clear consequence: the unbesmirching of her reputation. Inasmuch as Roz had recognised that her charges were unfounded, Isabel felt vindicated. Nobody—not even the possibly paranoid Roz MacLeod—was pointing the finger at her and alleging involvement with a married man. With the allegation out of the way, Isabel felt able to forget the whole unpleasant episode. George MacLeod might or might not be having an affair, but it was no business of hers. Roz MacLeod might or might not reestablish a proper relationship with her husband, but again that was something with which Isabel need not concern herself. She hoped, of course, that the couple would sort out their difficulties, but she could not allow herself to lose sleep over the possibility that they might not. Indeed, it would be unhelpful, and possibly even hazardous, to interfere on one side or the other. In short, she decided, the matter was closed.

She had told Jamie about the supermarket meeting and he had made his views clear. "Bad news," he said. "People like that are bad news, Isabel."

She conceded that he was probably right. "Yes, but—"

"No buts about it. You just can't get involved with them. You can't. Whatever you do, they'll draw you in, especially her. She sounds

really unstable, if you ask me."

She said nothing.

"So?" asked Jamie.

"So that's the end of that," she said.

"Good." He was looking at her intently. "Your trouble, you know, is that you're just too kind. You need to be tougher. You have to stop helping people, Isabel."

She looked at him reproachfully, and he immediately relented. "I don't really mean that, I suppose." He reached out to take her hand. "I wouldn't want you to be any different, you know. Not really. I'd hate you to be one of those hard-faced women who are interested in themselves and nobody else. I wouldn't want that."

She blushed.

"You know," he went on, "I was walking down Dundas Street the other day and this car drew up. It was one of those open cars—you know, an expensive blue number, white leather seats and so on. And there was a chap I had been at school with. And there was this woman in the passenger seat, sunglasses, blond hair, silk scarf. Straight out of a fashion magazine. Can you picture her?"

Isabel nodded. "Yes. Hard."

"That's exactly the word I'd use. Hard."

"And?"

"I hadn't seen him for ages—not since school. He had gone off to work in Singapore with one of those London banks and must have done pretty well. Bonuses, or whatever. Anyway, he introduced me to the woman and said that she was his fiancée. She looked at me and smiled—sort of. It was a look of boredom. Just not interested. Too fashionable. Too bored. Too hard."

Isabel found it difficult to believe that any woman meeting Jamie would be completely uninterested. How could one be indifferent to … She stopped herself from enumerating his charms. *Shall I compare thee …* Shakespeare had written a sonnet to somebody not unlike Jamie.

"And then I thought: What did he see in her? Did she amuse him? Did he find her conversation exciting? Did she spoil him?"

Isabel frowned. "Sex?" she said.

Jamie grinned. "Maybe."

"Sometimes that's all there is," said Isabel.

Jamie looked thoughtful. "He was a bit like that," he said. "He got into trouble for writing on a form that he wanted to study sex at university. The school wasn't amused."

Isabel waited for him to say more.

"He used to bring girlie mags to school. He slipped them into his maths folder."

"As boys have always done."

“Girls didn’t do that sort of thing?”

Isabel tried to remember. “I didn’t. But now that you come to mention it, there was a girl called Tricia Colquohon. Yes. She had a male pin-up on the inside of the lid of her desk. She thought it very daring, very outré.”

She smiled at the memory. “And then she eventually got married. I remember seeing a photograph of her wedding in the *Evening News*. She married the weediest-looking man. He was tiny, and had sloping shoulders. Poor Tricia. What do you think happened?”

“There were no other offers?”

“Maybe not. I thought that too. But then somebody explained to me: this weedy-looking man was heir to a whisky company—a large one.”

“Ah.”

“Yes. It explains a lot, doesn’t it? It doesn’t matter in the slightest what a rich man looks like.” She paused. “I must confess I couldn’t help but picture him in a swimming costume. With his spindly legs and sloping shoulders. I feel bad just to think about it. We do so many things we regret, don’t we?”

He was noncommittal. “Maybe.”

“Well, in my view we do. When I think of all the times I’ve had uncharitable thoughts about other people.”

Jamie seemed unwilling to explore that; the conversation was touching on a sensitive issue. “It does matter what a poor man looks like, then?”

Isabel thought for a moment. “Yes, it does matter. A poor man who’s good-looking stands a very good chance of improving his position in life. Haven’t you noticed? Look at women who are high-status in their own right. Look at their boyfriends. They’re usually good-looking. The man who married that Swedish princess. He was a personal trainer or something like that; he was pretty ordinary, but very handsome. There are plenty of other examples.”

“Maybe they’re just nice *and* good-looking.”

“Or nice *because* they’re good-looking. Good-looking people grow up with people being interested in them, being attentive to them. They respond in kind. If the world is nice to you, then you’re nice to the world.”

It occurred to her, even as she spoke, that this might be true of Jamie himself. Had anybody ever been dismissive of him when he was a boy? Or had he become used to looks of interest, to smiling indulgence, because of his beauty? And was it that which made him so benign, so at one with world? She could never ask him, of course, but it was, she thought, a real possibility.

“Handsome is as handsome does,” she muttered.

“What was that, Isabel?”

She looked away. “Nothing. Or nothing of any significance.”

He smiled. “You were thinking again.”

“Possibly.” *Handsome is as handsome does* was an intriguing expression. She assumed that it meant that handsome—or good—deeds were what counted. But it could mean something else, as these expressions sometimes did. One thing was clear: it meant that to be handsome was desirable in a moral sense, and she was not sure about that. She would have to think a bit more about it; but not just yet.

The new issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics* just made its deadline at the printers. Isabel always breathed a sigh of relief when the proofs were signed off, but knew that any feeling she had of now having time on her hands was deceptive. She could allow herself a week, perhaps, in which she gave little thought to the next issue, but after that the next deadline would make itself felt and the whole process would begin again. Most jobs were like that, though, she told herself; one piece of work is finished and the next one has to be started. That, quite simply, was how everything worked, and always had: a farmer sold a cow and started to rear another one; a cobbler finished a shoe and then put the next one on his last; a baker took one batch of bread out of the oven and put in the next. Those rhythms were eternal, she realised, but were sometimes lost sight of in a world in which people had become part of much more complex arrangements; a world in which it was easy to lose sight of where we fitted in, and it had become rare for us to know much about where things came from and who made them. “They come from China,” Jamie had said when Isabel had discussed this with him.

“Exactly,” said Isabel. “So that means that our things—the bits and pieces of our lives—never have any local association. Your bassoon, for instance …”

“Germany,” said Jamie. “Herr Schreiber’s soloist model.”

“And the reeds you put on it?”

“A man in Glasgow. Herr Macdonald.”

She smiled. “Would you feel the same about a reed from some unknown factory in China? The Great Shanghai Bassoon Reed Company, for instance?”

He scratched his head. “I’m not sure what I feel about my reeds. I suppose it’s good to know who made them. But do I bother all that much about my shirts? They come from the Philippines, I think. But do I care about my shirts?”

Isabel touched him. “I care about your shirts.”

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. “And I care about your clothes too.”

They grinned at one another, and then Jamie burst out laughing.

“Cue the violins.”

“But not bassoons?”

Jamie shook his head. “Bassoons are very unromantic. Wistful, yes. But not really romantic—in that sense, at least.”

“You mean erotic?”

“Yes.”

Several weeks passed. The summer, which had earlier been unpromising, now became more confident. A large and benevolent zone of high pressure from Iceland moved lazily over Scotland, and decided to remain comfortably where it was. Scots basked in its effect, hardly daring to believe that the weather gods, normally angry with Scotland for some reason—perhaps for some ancient slight that would take aeons to get over—were looking so kindly upon them. In Edinburgh, the Festival season began, with a riot of concerts and theatre and exhibitions. Jamie was busy; he had a big concert at the Usher Hall as well as a number of other, lesser engagements. And even Charlie had a programme worked out for him: beginning with a puppet show, a circus and a talking dog—all of which he received with enthusiasm. The talking dog, which had been trained to open and close its mouth in time with a voice that emanated from behind a curtain, proved to be an unexpected Festival success, not only with the three-year-olds for whom the show was intended, and tickets sold out for all its shows. The dog was interviewed by the press and expressed satisfaction at this turn of events, commenting on the lack of cats with shows of their own. *We want dogs to talk*, thought Isabel. *That’s why we talk to them so much. We want them to talk*.

Because of his playing commitments, Jamie was out of the house on most evenings during the Festival. Isabel understood, but missed him and looked forward to life’s returning to normal. Grace was always happy to babysit, which enabled Isabel to go out, but Isabel found that her pleasure in attending concerts was diminished if Jamie was not with her.

“I’ll take you out to dinner,” he promised. “The moment all this is over.”

They did manage one outing together, though, and that was to an exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy. Jamie had an early evening concert in George Street, which meant that he would be free by seven and could join Isabel in the gallery.

“And dinner afterwards?” she suggested.

Jamie was keen. “Somewhere uncrowded.”

“Home?”

“Not that uncrowded. Café St. Honoré?”

Isabel agreed, and made a babysitting arrangement with Grace, who

would arrive in time for the bath and the story. This was a treat for Charlie, who had worked out that he could prolong those precious moments at the end of the day by refusing to settle and by shouting, "More!"—or at least that he could do so when Grace was in charge, his parents being made of sterner stuff.

So when Isabel left that evening, Charlie waved goodbye with undisguised enthusiasm.

"Don't let him stay up," said Isabel.

"Of course not," said Grace, her tone slightly resentful of the implication that she could be manipulated by Charlie. "I never let him do that."

Isabel said nothing. Grace had many merits, but awareness of her own failings was not one of them. And there was nothing unusual in that, Isabel conceded; our own failings were invisible to most of us, or, if we did see them, they often appeared rather minor.

She caught a bus in Bruntsfield, from the bus stop opposite Cat's delicatessen. The traffic moved slowly as the Edinburgh Military Tattoo was on that night and there were streams of visitors making their way to the Castle. The pavements were also thronged with theatre-goers, who spilled out into the roads from time to time, making progress for vehicles difficult. From where she sat, Isabel could just make out the expression of the bus driver, one of egregious patience, like the look depicted by an artist on the face of a medieval saint sorely tried by his oppressors. A modern hagiography—if anybody were ever to bother with such a thing—would surely feature bus drivers and nurses and the people who took the fare at bridge tolls: toilers all at vital occupations, often showing good humour in the most difficult of circumstances. And they did it for years, thought Isabel, year upon year, and were badly rewarded compared to the hedge-fund managers and bankers who played the system to such evident advantage—to themselves.

She was reflecting on this—on economic injustice—when she alighted at the Mound and made her way into the gallery. The temperature had dropped a bit, although the sky was still clear; a breeze was coming in from the North Sea, enough to cool the city and invigorate its citizens after a languid day. Somewhere in the distance, from the Castle Rock above, she heard a pipe band playing; a warm-up perhaps for the Tattoo, when the massed pipes and drums would march across the esplanade in a spine-tingling display of swirling tartan and military braggadocio. She stopped to listen: "Mist-Covered Mountains," a favourite of her father's, and of hers too, the notes wafting down on the wind. A man stood beside her and lifted his head, listening too, and they exchanged understanding and appreciation, united for a brief moment in some shared sense of

Scottishness. But he was French, a visitor, for suddenly he muttered, "*Bon*," and continued on his way.

She went into the gallery. Although it was not the official opening of the exhibition, it was a special viewing for the paid-up Friends of the National Gallery of Scotland, of which Isabel was one. At the doorway a young woman in a white blouse and tartan skirt checked Isabel's name against a list. There were glasses of wine on silver trays and canapés on rectangular platters. Isabel took a glass of wine but, mindful of the Café St. Honoré ahead, resisted the snacks.

The exhibition was of neo-classical art from the seventeenth century onwards. The title was "The Classical Impulse," which intrigued Isabel. What exactly made people embrace classicism? The notion that beauty was to be found in classical themes and forms? A desire for order?

She turned a corner, her glass of wine in one hand, the exhibition brochure in the other. In the first gallery, there were several Poussins, and paintings by his disciples. There was no mistaking the master, of course, and for a few minutes she luxuriated before a study of figures in a classical landscape, their rich red robes caught in a breeze from the hills. One of them was looking at her, it seemed, and she reflected that this shepherd would have been a real person, a model in Poussin's studio, who could not have imagined that there would be a woman staring at him hundreds of years later in so alien a place. She could imagine his life, but he could never have imagined hers. *Sympathy looks backwards not forwards*, she thought. Or does it? Can we think about our great-great-grandchildren and feel sorry for them? We should, she decided.

She moved away from the Poussin. A man with an irritating voice had come up behind her and was expounding at length on Poussin's sense of nature to the woman beside him. Poor woman, thought Isabel; a whole evening of that voice ahead of her. She imagined their going for dinner afterwards and the woman's eyes glazing over as he continued to talk about Poussin between mouthfuls of chicken. One would have to eat *poussin* in such circumstances.

"Of course, nature is not entirely benign in Poussin," the man intoned. "Remember that wonderful painting in London? The one of the man bitten by the snake, and there's somebody running for help? I've always thought that—"

Isabel sidled away; the woman was looking at her, and she did not want her to think that she was … running for help. She looked at the painting before her: Giacinto Gimignani, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*. Joseph was handsome, an embodiment of temptation to the seductress on the couch; she was reaching for his tunic and he was recoiling. Isabel studied the woman's expression; the artist had caught the

moment, she thought—the moment when thwarted passion turns to the rage of rejection. Her eye moved to Joseph's face: he was clearly frightened, but there was also disgust. And that was understandable: in the story Joseph was interested only in food; he was a bon viveur—insofar as a slave, even a successful one, can be a bon viveur.

She stood back from the painting. Temptation. Adultery. Rejection. Misunderstanding.

She looked at her watch. She had an hour before Jamie was due to arrive; perhaps slightly more if she sent him a text message and told him to come later. He would pick that up when he turned on his phone after his concert. An hour and a half, perhaps. That was ample.

THE SMELL OF STONE GREETED HER AGAIN as she made her way up the stairs to Millie's flat. Of course she might not be in, Isabel realised. Millie liked the theatre and would have that evening several hundred Festival Fringe performances to choose from. It could be an entirely wasted trip—as well as representing the abandonment of her resolution not to get involved. But resolutions were aspirational, Isabel knew; honesty required one to acknowledge that.

Millie came to the door in a blue chinoiserie dressing gown. It must have been elegant once, but was now somewhat crumpled and worn, the silk lapels dull and frayed.

"I'm unannounced," Isabel said. "I hope you're not …" She hesitated, her eye drawn to the room beyond. "Not entertaining."

Millie shook her head and gestured for Isabel to enter. "I was planning to go out to a show, but I had a headache."

"I'm sorry."

Millie invited Isabel to sit down, moving a newspaper off a chair as she did so. "And then it went. I have the occasional migraine, but they have this new stuff that you swallow immediately and it stops it in its tracks." She touched her brow gingerly, as if afraid to reawaken the pain. "Would you like something—coffee? Tea? I don't have any wine, I'm afraid, and I never have spirits. I'd just drink them, I suspect, and then where would we be?"

Isabel sat down. "I was at an exhibition. 'The Classical Impulse.' There was a lovely Poussin."

"Not for me," said Millie. "For people who like Poussin, perhaps."

Isabel nodded. "Many would agree." She paused. She had imagined that Millie might be puzzled by her visit. "I had to come to see you."

"I thought you might," said Millie. "After your last visit, I told myself I'd see you again quite soon."

Isabel was surprised. Did Millie realise that she had given herself away? Not that a positive answer to that question would change what Isabel intended to say. It made it easier, perhaps, but did not fundamentally alter the message she had come to give.

Isabel steeled herself. "You might say that this is none of my business. You might say that I should keep out of it."

Millie hesitated before replying, and Isabel realised that this was precisely what her friend must be thinking. But when she did reply, it was calmly, and without any sign of irritation. "I wouldn't say that." She looked directly at Isabel. "Friends have to interfere from time to time."

Taken aback, Isabel took a moment to decide what to say next. "The only reason I've come to see you is that I believe that your affair with George is possibly putting you in danger. I think that Roz MacLeod is

a bit unstable and might do something foolish if she found out—"

Millie stopped her. "My affair with George?"

Isabel felt her breath come quickly; the chemicals of fear, she thought. "I believe that you're having an affair with George. You lied to me, you see. Sorry to have to say that, Millie, but you lied to me. You gave yourself away when you made that comment on the Elephant House. I didn't say anything about our having met there, but you knew that was where the meeting had taken place. Whom did you hear it from? From George, I assume."

Millie stared at her. Her lips moved slightly, as if she were about to speak, but she said nothing.

"And then," Isabel continued, "Roz hounded me down in the supermarket. She was hysterical—about her suspicions about George, about their rotten marriage, all the affairs—and I formed the opinion that she was unstable. I decided to come and tell you that you should be careful. That's all." She hesitated. The next part would be difficult. "But what upsets me, Millie, is that you betrayed me as a friend. I told you about how I was being falsely accused by Roz and you said nothing. You said nothing at all. You could have relieved me of my anxiety right there and then by telling me. But you didn't."

There was a silence. Isabel did not look at Millie's face but stared instead out of the window behind her. This, she told herself, is how some friendships end. Things are said that cannot be unsaid: a cliché, of course, but one of complete accuracy.

Millie suddenly stood up. *She's going to ask me to leave*, thought Isabel. But she did not; she crossed to the window and stood there, looking out at her washing line, which bore an odd mixture of unidentifiable garments. "Have you ever thought?" she said. "Have you ever thought of just how wrong we can sometimes be?"

The philosopher in Isabel wanted to ask: *Wrong in what sense?* But she said nothing.

Millie turned round. There was no anger in her. "I'm friendly with George," she said quietly. "He's a very good friend. But we are not lovers. That is just not true."

"Well, I have every reason—"

Millie interrupted her. "However, you're right that I misled you. I did. I misled you badly."

Isabel waited.

"You see," Millie went on. "There is also a friendship between me and Roz. It is very close. Or was close, should I say. Very."

"I see."

"No," said Millie. "I don't think you do, Isabel. Roz is somebody who can fall in love with both men and women." She paused. "And does." She paused again. "And I'm the same."

Isabel stared at her friend. *She should have told me. No, she should not. These things can be entirely private, if people want it that way*.

"George still loves Roz," Millie continued. "He loves her dearly. And she loves him too. I understood that, and I feel bad about ever getting involved with her in the first place. I urged her to stay with him—I broke up what was between us. And then I confessed to him what had happened, and he said that he had known all along—it happened from time to time, and he knew. He forgave me."

"But the window cleaner," protested Isabel. "What was that about?"

Millie allowed herself a smile. "We think of window cleaners as men. But do they have to be?"

Isabel returned the smile, tentatively. "A sexist assumption on my part."

"Exactly."

"But why would she go on about George having affairs?"

Millie shrugged. "Anxiety on her part. Guilt."

"I wondered about that."

"Then you were right."

"She should get help."

"She is," said Millie. "I've arranged it. There's a therapist I know who has agreed to take her on. She's very good."

Millie sat down again and reached for Isabel's hand. "So," she said. "That's that. All I have to say now to you is: sorry. I'm sorry that I haven't been exactly straight with you. But then, you see, I'm not exactly straight myself."

They both laughed. Then Isabel said, "I'm sorry too, Millie. I'm sorry that I misunderstood everything."

"Your misunderstanding is entirely understandable," said Millie. "That's what I tell my students, you know—when they get things wrong, as they do with distressing frequency."

"And how do they react?" Isabel asked.

"They laugh," said Millie. "Which is, I suppose, one of the healthiest ways of reacting to anything. To the world. To our silly attempts to make something of our lives. To all the curious ways we have of complicating our existence."

They stayed together for another twenty minutes. Then Isabel, noticing the time, explained that she had to meet Jamie at the exhibition. She did not mention the dinner they planned. It appeared that Millie would be alone that night, and Isabel wanted to be tactful. To have another person to have dinner with: it was a simple and entirely adequate goal in life, but not one that everybody, it seemed, could attain.

The Café St. Honoré was busy, but not so crowded as to prevent an

intimate conversation at the table. Isabel told Jamie what had happened, and he listened gravely.

"I would have reached exactly the same conclusion myself," he said. "Don't blame yourself."

"I'm not blaming myself," she said. "I just feel foolish."

"But we're all foolish," he said. "And you're far less foolish than anybody I know."

She smiled at him. "Flatterer."

"It's true."

"Then you're very kind." He was kinder that anybody she knew, to borrow his phrase. Far kinder. And more gentle. And more lovely in every respect.

"I wish Poussin could have painted you," she said suddenly.

Jamie looked at her in astonishment. "Why on earth do you say that?"

"Because it's true," she said. "And because, in general, it's better for things to be true than to be false."

He thought about this. "Of course." They had been studying the menu over a glass of light white wine. Now he returned to his scrutiny of the evening's offerings. Something caught his eye.

"*Poussin*," he said.

"There you are," said Isabel.

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Isabel continued her walk, and five minutes later was standing in front of Cat's delicatessen. Looking inside, through the large display window, she saw that Cat was pointing out something to a customer, while Eddie, her young assistant, was standing behind the counter. He caught Isabel's eye and waved enthusiastically, beckoning her in, in the manner of one who had important news to convey. Eddie was normally shy, but not now; now he had something to tell her.

EDDIE SAID TO HER, "You sit down, Isabel. I'll make you a cappuccino. And I've got something to tell you."

"I sensed that," said Isabel. "Good news, obviously."

She smiled at Eddie encouragingly, pleased that he was so manifestly happy. There had been little happiness in his life, she suspected, not that she knew too much about him. She knew that he was in his early twenties; that he lived with his parents, who had moved a few months ago to a new flat in Sighthill; that his father had something to do with the railways; and that something traumatic, something dark and unspoken, had happened to Eddie when he was seventeen or eighteen. Cat knew what that was, but Isabel had never asked her and did not want to know—not from indifference, but out of respect for Eddie. If he wanted her to know, he would have told her, and he had not.

Eddie was making progress. There had been one or two girlfriends, and this had helped his confidence, and over the last year or so he had shown greater readiness to accept responsibility. Cat could now leave him in charge of the shop for an entire day, even if he was still unable to look after it for much longer than that. Of course, he knew what to do and did it competently, but if he felt that he was on his own he panicked. This had something to do with what had happened—Isabel was sure of that—and only the passage of time would help with that.

Eddie ushered her across to one of the tables at which coffee was served. "We haven't got that Italian newspaper you like," he said. "But here's the *Scotsman*."

"I've already done the *Scotsman*," said Isabel. "And I don't really need anything to read. You go and make my coffee. Then give me this news of yours."

Eddie left her, and Isabel glanced at Cat, who was still with her customer. Her niece noticed and nodded. Something in Cat's expression indicated to Isabel that this customer was taking a long time to make up her mind over which tea to buy.

Eddie produced the cappuccino with a flourish. He had recently

taken to signing the frothy milk-top with a thistle, a trick he had learned from an Irish barman who served Guinness with the outline of a four-leaved clover traced on the foam. He sat down and smiled broadly at Isabel.

"Guess," he challenged. "Go ahead and guess."

She made a show of thinking. "Let me see. You've won the Spanish lottery. *El Gordo*—the fat one. A million euros, tax-free."

"Nope."

"All right. You went in for a screen test and they've just phoned to say could you come back, and bring your agent?"

Eddie shook his head. "No, I'd never be an actor. I don't like having my photograph taken."

She made a gesture of defeat. "I'm not going to get it, am I? You tell me, Eddie."

The young man leaned forward in his chair. "All right. Listen to this, Isabel. You know I've got this uncle?"

She did not.

"Well, I have. He's called Donald and he's my mother's older brother. He used to have a wife, who was my aunt, and then she went off with this guy from Glasgow. It was her fault—my dad said that. So Uncle Donald was left by himself."

Isabel nodded. "Yes. These things are … well, they're not very pleasant."

"He was really cut up over it for a long time. But he's better now and he's got a girlfriend—you should see her, Isabel—she's amazing. Much better than his wife. So there's Uncle Donald and he gets a letter one morning from a firm of lawyers in Dundee and they say that his cousin, who never married, has died and left him her house in Montrose. And her car. The car's useless—Uncle Donald went to look at it and said that the gearbox was shot: it was the way she used to change gear, like stirring porridge, he said. But the house is quite nice. He doesn't need it because he's got his own place in Dalkeith, and he doesn't even have a mortgage."

"So he's going to sell it?"

Eddie beamed with pleasure. "Yes. And he wants to treat me to a trip. He's always said that he wanted to go to the United States and Canada. He's never been, you see, but now he can afford to take a couple of months off and go all the way from Miami up to Alaska, with a bit of Canada in between. The Rockies and Vancouver. Him and me, in a car he's going to rent. His girlfriend can't get that much time off, but she'll come for the first three weeks."

Isabel thought of driving across the Midwest and the experience of its sheer vastness. It would be like being at sea, she imagined.

"That's wonderful, Eddie," she said. "All that way …"

“Yes,” he said. “Places like Nebraska. Imagine going there. And the Grand Canyon. And Las Vegas.”

Isabel thought. “Las Vegas …”

“Yes,” said Eddie. “And Cat’s said that it’s fine. I’ve got a friend, you see, who can do my job here for me. He’s worked in a deli before. Cat has spoken to him and says that it’s all right.”

Eddie finished and sat back in his chair, waiting for Isabel’s reaction to his news. She leaned across the table and patted him lightly on the forearm. She did not mean the gesture to look condescending, but she realised it did. He did not notice.

She spoke warmly. “That’s marvellous, Eddie,” she said. “I think that’s just wonderful.”

She did not, but that was not the point. It was wonderful for him, as it would be for any young man who had never been anywhere, other than a trip to London once and five precious, heady days in Spain as a teenager.

He smiled at her. “America!”

She nodded. “Yes. You know that I’m half American?”

He expressed surprise, and she explained to him about her sainted American mother.

“She was a saint? Really?”

Eddie could take things literally—maybe a slight hint of Asperger’s, she wondered—but no, he was too sensitive in other ways for that diagnosis.

“Of course not. Not in the real sense. I call her that be cause, well, because I thought she was a very good woman. She was kind, you see.”

“Like you,” said Eddie.

The compliment was not contrived; it came naturally, and Isabel felt its effect, like a shaft of warming sun.

“That’s nice of you, Eddie. But I don’t think I’m particularly kind—or not any kinder than anybody else.”

He said she was, and then Cat finished with her customer and returned to the counter to ring up the sale.

Eddie sighed. “I’m almost too excited to work, but I have to, I suppose. Sinclair starts the day after tomorrow. I’m taking a week off before we go. We’re flying from Glasgow.”

“Sinclair?”

“My friend. You’ll like him, Isabel …” His voice trailed off, and Isabel realised that she would not like Sinclair.

“I’m sure I will.”

She thought: we have just expressed to each other the exact opposite of what we truly feel. And yet, in doing so, we have made our meaning perfectly clear. Isabel glanced at Cat, who was looking in

her direction. If I don't like Sinclair, she thought, then I can be absolutely sure that Cat will.

On impulse, Isabel whispered to Eddie as he rose to leave the table, "This Sinclair … It's a silly question, but tell me: Is he good-looking?"

Eddie seemed bemused. "Well …"

Isabel saw that Eddie was unwilling to discuss Cat's love life and she could understand that.

Eddie grinned. "Yes," he said. "Of course. He's been a model in his spare time, you know. I saw a picture of him in an ad once—an ad for jeans. I think he'd like to do it full time."

Isabel said nothing; Cat was coming over to the table as Eddie returned to work. The information that Eddie had just imparted was not at all welcome. Cat did not *need* a young man who posed as a model for jeans; not in the slightest.

"Jeans," she muttered under her breath.

Arriving at the table, Cat looked puzzled. "Jeans?"

"Just thinking," said Isabel.

Cat sat down. "Eddie's told you his news? He's as high as a kite about it."

"Yes," said Isabel. "He's pretty excited. And who wouldn't be?"

"Not me," said Cat. "That uncle of his—I met him, you know. He came in here once, and …"

Isabel waited for Cat to finish. Her niece could be uncharitable.

Cat lowered her voice. "Seriously dull. Terminally boring. And … well, there's no way round it: he's got these most dreadful teeth—all crooked, and half of them look rotten. I couldn't be in a car for five thousand miles, or whatever it is, with teeth like that sitting next to me. The Americans are going to freak out—you know what they're like about teeth.

They'll probably cart him off to an emergency dentist the moment he opens his mouth. Or they won't let his teeth into the country. They might say, 'Look, you can come in, but teeth like that stay out.' "

Isabel did not want to smile, but could not help herself. "He'll be all right. I don't think Eddie notices teeth."

Cat shrugged. There was not much more to be said about the uncle, and her conversation now went off in another direction. "I gave your telephone number to somebody," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Oh?"

Cat went on to explain, "There's a woman who's been dropping in here for coffee over the last week or so. She's staying in a flat in Forbes Road. She's one of you."

"Of me?"

"A philosopher. I got speaking to her and she told me she's over here on sabbatical. Four months, or six months, or whatever it is.

She's working on something or other—she told me what it was, but I forget. She's Australian. She's called Jane—I don't know her other name. She told me, but it went in one ear and out the other." Cat paused. "I thought that she seemed a bit lonely and so I asked her whether she'd like to meet you, since you were a philosopher. She said she's heard of you—she reads that journal of yours."

"One of the two thousand four hundred and eighty-seven," said Isabel. That, she explained, was the number of readers that each issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics* was calculated to have.

Cat listened to the explanation. "That's tiny. You could probably invite all the readers to tea."

"Very funny," said Isabel. "And, actually, it's not a bad figure at all—at least as far as academic journals go."

She did not have to say this to Cat; she did not have to justify herself, but she continued, as one who is made fun of
will make fun of another to distract attention, "I have a friend who edits a journal that has a circulation of fifty-eight. And he wrote a book—on the nature of existence—that sold thirty-two copies."

Immediately she felt ashamed and disloyal. I should defend him against people like Cat. And if books on existence did not exist, then …

Cat glanced out of the window. "Do you ever wonder whether what you do is worthwhile? I'm not saying it isn't—I'm just asking."

Isabel gave an answer that Cat had not expected. "All the time," she said. "Don't you?"

Cat frowned. "Me? Ask myself whether what I do is worthwhile?"

"That's the question," said Isabel.

"Of course not."

"Well, maybe you should," said Isabel. "Maybe everybody should—even you."

"I sell cheese and Italian sausages," Cat retorted. "I don't have time to think. Most people don't. They do what they have to do because they need to eat."

So life was reduced to cheese and sausages, thought Isabel; that was what really counted. Such reductionism was hardly attractive, but Isabel felt that Cat was probably right about people not having the time or energy for philosophy. Self-doubt was a luxury, as, perhaps, was the examined life. And yet the examined life, as the adage had it, was the only life worth living.

She looked at Cat. Ontology, self-doubt, cheese, sausages—it would be best to leave these for the time being.

"This Australian woman," she said. "She'll get in touch, will she? I could ask her round. It can't be much fun being in a strange place by yourself."

“She said she’ll phone you,” said Cat. “And now, I’d better go.”

Isabel nodded. “You’ll miss having Eddie to help you. But I gather you’ve got somebody lined up. I was hearing about Sinclair … You’ve met him?”

Isabel tried to make the question sound innocent, but it was not, and Cat’s manner revealed that she knew this. Her reply was guarded. “Yes. Once. He’ll do.”

Isabel held Cat’s gaze. Something had passed between them; an unspoken mutual understanding that came from having known one another for so long. There’s something there, thought Isabel. And then she said to herself: *Here we go—again*.

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

THE PERILS OF MORNING COFFEE

An Isabel Dalhousie eBook Original Story

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
    The Perils of Morning Coffee
Other Books by This Author
Excerpt from The Forgotten Affairs of Youth

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
    The Perils of Morning Coffee
Other Books by This Author
Excerpt from The Forgotten Affairs of Youth